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Conference Abstract

Fibres in Meise Botanic Garden: A Future for Heritage Collections?

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Abstract

The precious historical collection of fibres in Meise Botanic Garden, with over 500 specimens in old hand-blown glass jars, was rehabilitated in 2017. Most of the specimens date back to the second half of the 19th century, a period of technological revolution. The rehabilitation retraces the industrious search for every possible raw material provided by nature at that time. The result is astonishing, not only regarding the origin and quality of the preserved material, its label information and its accompanying manuscripts, but also because of the extremely wide range of fibre species and their processing.

Noted collectors enriching our collections were, inter alios, the Josephite Brother Bernardin of Melle (Belgium), Carl von Martius and his brother Theodor Martius of Erlangen (Germany) and Henri Van Heurck of Antwerp (Belgium). Famous museums and botanic gardens such as the Museum of French Colonies in Paris (France) and the Experimental Garden in Eala (Democratic Republic of the Congo DRC) were also important suppliers. Samples originate from all over the world with strong representation from India, the DRC and Brazil.

The nature of the fibres in the collection is very diverse and ranges from stem, bark and leaf fibres to husk fibres and seed hairs. Some of them have been processed into bundles and braids, beaten bark, spun thread and twined rope, as well as rough or organza-like

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fabrics. Even plant pith, pulp and paper are included, next to silkworm silk and mineral tremolite (a form of asbestos).

Not only are familiar plant fibres such as cotton, sisal, ramie, coir, flax and jute present, but also Congo jute, Cuban bast, lacebark, piassava, esparto, fern wool, fibres of linden, sunflower, banana and pineapple, next to different types of paper and bark cloth. More than a hundred genera appear. Dominant families in terms of specimen numbers are Malvaceae (including Tiliaceae), Liliaceae (including Agavaceae), Palmae, Urticaceae, Bombacaceae, Musaceae and Gramineae.

This upgraded collection exhibits an unexpected data diversity and consequently offers multitudinous possibilities for innovative research. One of our mission statements is undoubtedly: safeguarding historical collections for the future.

Keywords

fibres, historical collection, rehabilitation

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